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ABSTRACT

An explanation of the experiential education model is presented in this paper by highlighting the strength and uniqueness of the experiential educational opportunities surrounding the campus radio station. Three perspectives are used to explain the model: structure and organization, workshop, and pedagogical philosophy. The paper utilizes experience at WCNS, the College of Wooster's (Ohio) 890 watt FM-stereo radio station, as the example for the model. The paper suggests that the management and operation of the campus radio station, practically and officially the students' domain (in this case), provides a unique opportunity to engage in experiential education that presents an immediate link between core concepts in the communication discipline and its practical aspects. The paper concludes that students can gain hands-on experience in a variety of ways, including casting programs, engineering programs, producing shows, supervising the operation of others, and acquiring managerial and communication skills. (MS)

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THE COLLEGE RADIO STATION: A MODEL OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

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THE COLLEGE RADIO STATION: A MODEL OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

The following paper grew out of the author's experience with WCWS, The College of Wooster's 890 watt FM-stereo radio station. WCWS, housed in the Speech Communication Department, has grown in recent years from 390 watt to 890 watt with an increase of listening audience from 40,000 to between 500,000 and 800,000. Recent competition for the diminishing available frequencies on the educational band has intensified with several educational institutions recognizing the public relations and marketability features. The purpose of this paper is to highlight not the marketability or public relations aspects of the campus radio station, but rather to indicate the strength and uniqueness of the experiential educational opportunities surrounding the radio station.

WCWS is an independently student-managed and student-operated radio station. Approximately 130 students are involved in the operation of the station, and a broadcast workshop (taken for one-quarter credit) is designed to prepare students in all areas of the radio station. The operation of the radio station is supervised by a faculty member who serves as the link between the station and the department and the college at large.

The paper will explain the experiential education model from the following perspectives: structure and organization, workshop, and pedagogical philosophy. The management and operation of the station is in the hands of students. Three levels are present in the station hierarchy: management, line-staff, and programmers. The management consists of the General Manager, Program Director, Director of Program Development, and a Chief Engineer (in the WCWS case, a part-time licensed engineer).

The General Manager is the station's chief officer. This position allows for making final decisions in consultation with the faculty adviser. The Program Director, and Director of Program Development assist the General Manager in their respective areas. The Chief Engineer oversees the technical side of the station.

The next level of management consists of line-staff positions. These positions include: News Director, Music Director, Sports Director, Production Director, Public Relations Director, Public Affairs Director, Continuity Director, and Special Projects Director. Below the line-staff level are approximately 100 programmers whose "job descriptions" include the engineering and the casting of a given program. Almost all programmers engineer and cast their show. Such an operation requires that each programmer gains on-hands experience in operating the mixing board, read several meters indicating the broadcast operation of the station, execute the emergency broadcast system, and thus develop a clear form of narration.

The format presented in the case of WCWS covers a wide range of programs ranging from classical music to classical rock, and including public affairs shows, new wave, oldies, musicals and operas.

Given the nature of the station's format and the responsibilities of each programmer, the station requires elaborate and practical preparation. This preparation is handled in the broadcast workshop which is designed to fully prepare the students to familiarize themselves with all aspects of the station.

The workshop covers topics such as newscasting--working on narration and correct enunciations, news editing and news preparations, engineering programs, operation of the production studio, creating public service

announcements, operating the mixing board and other main studio features such as engineering live broadcasts from the satellite and live broadcasts from various campus locations. The line staff members of the radio station are associated with the workshop through their assistance to the instructor of the broadcast workshop in their respective area of supervision. Simply put, each line staff member helps the workshop instructor in the teaching and training of students during a given unit scheduled in the workshop.

Though the station may be looked at as highly structured given the rigid breakdown between management, line staff and programmers, the practical side presents a rather flexible and informal operation. Though each student understands his or her responsibilities in addition to the guidelines outlined by the management and line staff, much independence is given to each programmer. This independence is in the form of choosing the desirable format, selecting records and creating the specific program theme and opening the program for call-in requests.

The division between management and line staff allows for the combination of outlining general guidelines, supervision, and overall policy on the part of the management and a more specific and limited view and supervision on the part of each line staff position. This division allows the management to focus on the large issues surrounding the radio station such as program development, policy issues, initiating program underwriting, and deciding on format, scheduling and quality. The line staff responsibilities are more direct and limited to the performance of each programmer in a designated area. The management can delegate to the line staff those duties that require close supervision and direct involvement with programmers.

The radio station is considered, under the experiential education model, an extension of the mass media curriculum in the Speech Communication

department with the broadcast workshop serving as the actual link between the academic and the experiential side of the discipline. In addition to the broadcast workshop, an indirect relationship exists between other courses in the mass media curriculum and the radio station. These courses include aspects such as media law, FCC rules and regulations, media access, gate keeping, agenda setting, and public relations, to name a few.

This writer, however, pursues an extended view of the experiential education model. Though it is natural to consider a radio station an extension of the mass media curriculum, it is equally important to view the operation of the radio station as a practice ground for interpersonal and group communication whereby daily activities include topics such as decision making, conflict resolution, assertiveness, trust and other forms of effective communication skills. With this view, the radio station presents a more involved and a more integrated form of experiential education.

With the expanded view regarding experiential education, other courses than the mass media area can have a bearing on the operation of the radio station whereby a significant portion of the Speech Communication discipline can be put to an experiential use in the radio station. The writer is aware of the logistic and supervisory difficulties involved with such a model, and does not attempt to get into the details of its implementation. It is sufficient at this point to consider two directions in pursuing the expanded experiential education model. The first is a more structured one where all aspects of effective communication skills are incorporated in the broadcast workshop together with the technical and on-hands features of the practicum. The second direction, a more flexible one, calls for a

greater involvement on the part of the faculty of the Speech Communication department and/or the adviser to the station in promoting effective communication skills. This involvement may be in the form of collaboration with the instructors of the courses that cover effective communication skills.

For the experiential education model to be effective, the radio station must be the students' domain with faculty involvement limited to instruction and advisory responsibilities. Decisions concerning staff appointments, format and production are better left in the students' hands in order to insure a true form of experiential education. It is with this recommendation that others may find weaknesses, even potential problems. Usually such weaknesses can be reduced to questioning a student's ability to perform responsibly and maturely without a higher authority guiding most aspects of the station. Given the public relation and marketability features of the station, the risks are quite real. The solution to this problem, which has been the experience of this writer, lies in the adviser's ability and skill to motivate, delegate, and, above all, select well qualified individuals for management positions. It is left to each institution to design its own rules and regulations regarding the operation of the campus radio station and the adviser's role vis-a-vis these guidelines. The principal thrust, however, should be the emphasis on "independently student-managed and operated radio stations."

This paper attempted to present in a capsule form an experiential education model surrounding the campus radio station. The management and operation of the radio station, practically and officially the students' domain, poses a unique opportunity to engage in experiential education that presents an immediate link between core concepts in the communication discipline and its practical aspects. Students can gain on-hands experience

in a variety of ways including casting programs, engineering programs, producing shows, supervising the operation of others, and acquiring managerial and communication skills.